

A close-up photograph of a woman's hands holding a bright red ceramic mug. She is wearing a dark, textured sweater. The background is softly blurred, focusing attention on the mug and her hands. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

**THE SOLID
GROUNDS
COFFEE
COMPANY**

A
SUPPER CLUB
NOVEL

CARLA LAUREANO

Praise for Carla Laureano

The Solid Grounds Coffee Company

“What a bright and engaging story! *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company* is full of snappy and smart dialogue, genuine characters I was rooting for, and sweet romance with just the right amount of tension. I loved getting to know Analyn and Bryan and seeing their two very different worlds dovetail into one layered, romantic, and delicious story.”

LAUREN K. DENTON, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HIDEAWAY, *HURRICANE SEASON*, AND *GLORY ROAD*

“Carla Laureano is at the top of her game with *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company*. I was invested in Bryan and Ana’s journey from the opening pages and had fun catching up with characters from Laureano’s previous books. I enjoyed watching Bryan set out to turn his life around . . . and of course, I loved the delicious romance! (And, yes, now I’m craving a latte!) Another winner from an author who belongs on your keeper shelf.”

MELISSA TAGG, CAROL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE WALKER
FAMILY SERIES AND *NOW AND THEN AND ALWAYS*

“Coffee and romance! Who could ask for a better treat?”

DIANN MILLS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *FATAL STRIKE*

“Carla Laureano writes the kind of books I’m eager to begin . . . and that I’m just as sorry to see end. *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company* is filled to overflowing with fictional characters who readers will wish were their real-life friends, along with a how-is-this-going-to-work-out romance and a glimpse into the creation of many people’s favorite addiction, coffee.”

BETH K. VOGT, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THINGS I NEVER
TOLD YOU* AND *MOMENTS WE FORGET*

“Carla Laureano has a reputation for penning smart, sophisticated reads, and *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company* is no exception. Brimming with complex characters and a captivating storyline, it’s a book readers are certain to devour and one I highly recommend.”

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“I’m an avid coffee drinker, so this book definitely intrigued me. With elements of redemption and second chances at love, *The Solid Grounds Coffee Company* was quite an enjoyable read.”

T. I. LOWE, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LULU’S CAFÉ*

Brunch at Bittersweet Café

“With fun food scenes and organic spiritual elements, Laureano’s book will be relished by sweet-toothed inspirational readers.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“The delightful characterization of baker and pastry chef Melody Johansson coupled with a realistic romance and spiritual message make *Brunch at Bittersweet Café* an exceptional pick.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEWS

“This romantic drama portrays realistically flawed characters in messy situations.”

WORLD MAGAZINE

The Saturday Night Supper Club

“A terrific read from a talented author. Made me hungry more than once. I can’t wait to read what comes next.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE MASTERPIECE*

“Bright, jovial, and peppered with romance and delectable cuisine, this is a sweet and lively love story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

“Romance aficionados and fans of stories about overcoming obstacles and the role of faith in everyday life will eagerly await the next entry in this sweet food-centered series.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Writing charmingly about faith, love, friendship, and food, Laureano will leave readers hungry for the next installment in the Supper Club series.”

BOOKLIST

**THE SOLID
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CARLA LAUREANO



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For Lori, who literally prayed this book into existence.

*Your friendship and your encouragement
mean more than you'll ever know.*

Acknowledgments

IF AUTHORS ARE office-dwelling creatures who court their muses—or at least their coffeemakers—in yoga pants, then novels are their high-maintenance progeny who need entire teams of specialists before they can meet their public.

This book's specialists are even more special than most. I owe a great debt of thanks to: my Tyndale #dreamteam, Karen Watson, Jan Stob, Sarah Rische, Amanda Woods, Elizabeth Jackson, Andrea Garcia, Mark Lane, Danika King, and the Tyndale sales team whose enthusiasm is so crucial to the success of a book; my ever-wise and humorous agent, Steve Laube; my personal circle of awesome, who get a mention every time because they've stood by me with every twist and turn of this business, Evangeline Denmark, Brandy Vallance, Amber Lynn Perry, and Lori Twichell; my fearless assistant and de facto publicist, Audra Jennings, who didn't roll her eyes *too* hard every time I had a last-minute request; and my family, Rey, Nathan, Preston, Mom, and Dad, who would be proud of me if I never wrote another story . . . that's the kind of love that lets me write these books. Lastly, my gratitude goes to my gracious heavenly Father, who chose to give me the desires of my heart even as He uses them to mold me into the person He wants me to be.

Prologue

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, Suesca was haunted.

From everything Bryan Shaw had seen, he believed it. But for him, it wasn't the spirits of the dead that hovered over this small Colombian town. It was the memory of the living. A memory that he'd ignored, run from, and blotted out for three years without any significant success.

He zipped up his one-man tent and stood there, letting the cool, dark night surround him before he made his way toward the campfire where a cluster of other climbers gathered. Suesca was the epicenter of rock climbing in Colombia, its 8,400-foot elevation giving it the benefit of comfortable temperatures year-round, its proximity to Bogotá giving it the benefit of ease of access. The entire town was built around climbers: gear shops, hostels, campgrounds. Like most, Bryan had opted to rent a tent from the outfitter and camp here, just a stone's throw from the rock.

"Hey, mate, want a beer?" Jack, the big blond Australian Bryan had met earlier in the day, pressed a bottle into his hand as he approached and slapped him on the back. "I was

just telling this mob about how you on-sighted Natalio Ruiz this morning.”

Bryan made a noncommittal sound that could be taken as assent or appreciation and settled into a spare folding chair by the fire. Just because he'd never climbed that particular route didn't mean he'd never been on that pitch—he'd been climbing in Colombia on and off for most of his career. Nor did he say that for a climber of his caliber, a simple 5.9 wasn't much of a challenge. But Jack was a convivial sort who liked to tell stories, even if they weren't his own. Fine with Bryan. He didn't much feel like talking tonight.

Maybe Suesca had been a mistake after all. He could have gone on to Florián or La Mojarra without returning to the site of his old memories. Maybe he'd figured that by coming back he could reclaim them, expunge them. He'd been wrong.

Bryan took a swig of his beer and stared into the dark. He and Vivian had met here for the first time five years ago when Bryan was filming a climbing video. She'd been a production assistant, a climber herself, and even though Bryan was supposed to have his mind on the rock, half the time it had been on her. Which explained why he'd fallen on his first attempt. Embarrassing, but altogether understandable considering the nature of the distraction. Black-haired, lithe, and athletic, she was pretty much a climbing supermodel, and she naturally drew the eye of any man within a hundred yards.

A shadowed woman skirted the fire, and for a moment, he could have sworn it was her. Now he was seeing things, and he didn't even have alcohol to blame for it. He took another drink, closed his eyes, and tipped his head back to the sky.

“Hello, Bryan.”

His eyes snapped open and he looked at the bottle in his hand as if it could confirm that he hadn't lost time, wasn't in the middle of some drunken vision. When his voice came out,

it sounded hoarse and scratchy. “Vivian. What are you doing here?”

She dragged a folding chair over and plopped down beside him. “What anyone else is doing here, I imagine. Just got in tonight. How about you?”

“Last night, late.” He looked her over as if to convince himself that she wasn’t an apparition. But no, he knew her features as well as he knew his own. Hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, longer than it had been last time he’d seen her. Chiseled cheekbones. Sleek climbing pants and sport-fabric shell showing off every curve and muscle on her small frame. His stomach tightened and his heart clenched in response. “You’re telling me we just happened to be in Colombia at the same time? That’s some coincidence.”

“It’s no coincidence. I was in Peru, and when I saw your Instagram, I thought, *Why not?*” She flashed him a smile that managed to be halfway between knowing and regretful.

“In that case, I’m going to bed. Early morning tomorrow, and I want to be rested.” He rose and saluted her with his mostly empty bottle.

He’d only taken a few steps when her voice trailed after him. “Since when are you so concerned with getting your beauty sleep?”

He paused for a second, then continued to his tent several hundred yards away and ripped the zipper open. He resisted the urge to shatter the bottle, setting it down carefully inside instead. Turned on the battery-operated lantern and zipped himself in, then stripped down to his athletic shorts. All the while he clenched his jaw so tightly his teeth ached.

Bryan was just reaching for the lantern’s switch when the flap of his tent opened with a slow, deliberate zip. He straightened, muscles tensed, hoping it was just some drunk climber who forgot which rented tent was his own.

He couldn't be so lucky.

Vivian ducked through the opening and settled on her knees, zipping up after herself. "I don't like the way we left things."

"Just now? Or three years ago?"

"Both." She studied him carefully. "You look good."

He looked away before he could be pulled in by her pleading expression. "I'm not doing this, Viv. If you remember, you were the one who decided how we left things. I asked you to marry me, you said no, and I never saw you again. It sounded pretty definitive to me."

She crept closer. "Bryan, I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I just . . ."

"You just didn't want to marry me. I'm over it." He made his face and his tone stony, as if the affectation would reach his heart.

Vivian bit her bottom lip. "Well, I guess I'm not."

Great, she was going to cry. He'd never been able to bear seeing her upset. That had been the whole problem. He would have given up everything for her, and she would give up nothing for him.

"I'm sorry. This was a mistake. I just thought—" Her voice strangled for a split second. "I thought if I could see you again, I could stop wondering if I made the right decision."

Despite the fact he hated himself for it, her imploring tone began to soften the hard shell he'd erected around the part of his heart she still owned. He reached out and smoothed a tear off her cheek with the roughened pad of his thumb. "Viv, we can't go back. What's done is—"

"Done, I know. But it doesn't stop me from missing you. It doesn't stop me from wishing I'd done things differently."

Her eyes, shining wet in the glare of the lantern, met his, and all the anger he'd held against her crumbled. For a while, he'd thought an endless string of women would help numb

the pain, but they couldn't erase her memory when he'd never stopped loving her, never stopped wanting her.

Bryan didn't think when he slid a hand behind her neck and brought her closer. Acted on instinct when he lowered his lips to hers. And when her arms wrapped around him and she kissed him in return, the last three years melted away. It felt like all the wrongs in his life had been righted.

* * *

Bryan woke to a pale-blue glow through the tent canvas, the distant chirping of birds alerting him to the cusp of morning. He rolled to his side and touched only an empty space where Vivian should be, the chill on the nylon telling him she'd been gone for a while.

Quietly, he pulled on his clothes and shoes and unzipped his tent flap, a rush of relief coming immediately when he saw Vivian crouched in front of a small campfire. The smell of coffee drifted from the aluminum percolator set on the rocks. He crept up behind her and pressed a kiss to her neck. "Good morning, beautiful."

Instead of twisting around to kiss him as he expected, she straightened and slipped out of his embrace. "Coffee?"

"Sure." He retrieved his lightweight camp mug and held it out as she poured the thick black cowboy coffee into it. "Sleep well?"

Once more, she avoided his eyes. For the first time, a pang of fear struck him. "Viv? What's wrong?"

"Last night shouldn't have happened."

Bryan frowned and settled into the dirt beside her. "Viv, baby, I know it wasn't planned, but now that you're back . . ."

She swallowed hard and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm getting married."

He swayed in a sudden rush of dizziness. “Excuse me?”

“In May. I came here for closure. To get you out of my head once and for all. I didn’t mean—”

“You’re getting married?” His stomach clenched, not a single word after those three registering in his brain. She was getting married. To someone else. Not to him.

“Bryan—”

He jumped to his feet, but it didn’t feel like his brain had any control over his body. “How could you? I thought—”

“Bryan, I’m sorry. You know I’m sorry.” She buried her face in her hands. “If Luke finds out . . .”

“Wait, not Luke Van Bakker . . . What does he have to do with this?”

Vivian raised tear-filled eyes to his. “I thought you knew.”

Bryan wiped a hand over his face, sudden understanding dawning. Luke Van Bakker, president and CEO of Pakka Mountaineering. A man he’d known for ten years, one he’d like to think was a friend. Engaged to his ex, and neither of them had told him.

Even worse, Pakka was his biggest sponsor, the one that allowed him to travel all over the world climbing instead of holding a real job.

“How could you come to me when you were engaged to him? I thought . . . I thought you were coming back to me. Wasn’t that what this was all about? How much you wanted to be able to do things over?” He scrubbed his hands through his hair. “You must not think very much of me if you think I’d be okay with this.”

Viv jumped to her feet. “Do you think I meant for this to happen? You can’t tell him.”

“Tell him?” Bryan barked out a harsh laugh. “The last thing I want is for Luke Van Bakker to know I just slept with his fiancée!”

She jerked her head around as his voice rose, and sure

enough, another climber poked a sleepy head out of a tent. He lowered his voice. "You and I are screwed. If there's anything Luke prizes, it's loyalty." It suddenly occurred to him that had Luke prized loyalty so much, he wouldn't have taken up with Bryan's ex in the first place. "How long have you been seeing him? Was that why you wouldn't marry me?"

"No! No, Bryan, you have to believe me." She reached for his hand, but he stepped out of reach. "Luke and I have only been together for a year. We reconnected at an event. Figured it had been long enough, you know? I assumed you were long over me, that you wouldn't care."

"Which is why no one told me."

"I swear to you, it wasn't like that . . ." Viv broke off, her lips pressing together stiffly, and Bryan turned to see Jack approaching them at a jog.

"Morning, you two." He beamed at them, a big blond puppy. "Wanted to know if you need a ride back to Bogotá this morning."

Right now, bugging out of Suesca didn't sound like a bad idea. "Sure," Bryan said at the same time Viv said, "No thanks. I'm climbing La Bruja today."

Bryan stared at her. "Not by yourself, you aren't."

She lifted an eyebrow and planted her hands on her hips. "And since when have you had *any* say over what I climbed?"

"As your former instructor, I do have some say. And unless you've suddenly advanced in your climbing ability, La Bruja is way over your grade."

Jack finally figured out he was stepping in the middle of something bigger than a climbing dispute and started to back away. "Okay, mates. We're leaving at eight if you change your mind."

Vivian never took her eyes from Bryan. "Go if you want. I'll find someone else to belay for me."

Bryan snorted. "You're out of your mind."

“You doubt my climbing ability?”

“No, I doubt your beta. I’ve watched these guys. None of them have even come close to sending that route. They wouldn’t know a crimp from a hole in the ground.” It was, he could admit, a little unfair; there were decent sport climbers among them, but La Bruja was the most difficult trad route in Suesca, and Bryan was betting any information they’d given her was colored by their need to impress her, not firsthand experience.

“Then come with me.” Her eyes held a challenge.

“What game are you playing at?”

“No game. I came here from Peru and I’m not leaving until I climb.”

“So do Azul.”

“I’m not interested in Azul. You in or what?”

He knew that look. Knew that stubborn glint in her brown eyes. It was one of the things he’d loved most about her, one of the things that made her an excellent climber. She was going to do this with or without him. And however angry and hurt he might be right now, she was better off climbing with him as a partner than without.

Bryan shook his head. “Fine. You win. But I lead.”

“I lead.” Her eyes silently dared him to argue. “And to be clear, I got my beta from Alejandro, the guide at the shop. It’s solid.”

“Fine.” He held up his hands. She was a good climber. As long as she placed active pro in the right spots, she’d be okay. And he’d be there on belay to catch her when she inevitably fell—as he’d always been.

They silently ate their breakfast of protein bars, trail mix, and coffee, the strain palpable. The whole time Bryan shoved down his feeling of betrayal and what felt like the awakening of his long-dormant conscience. He’d done many things in his life, but sleeping with another man’s fiancée was in an entirely

different class. If he felt this betrayed, how would Luke feel? And how long would it take for him to find some loophole to cancel Bryan's sponsorship contract if he found out?

He needed to finish out this day, keep Vivian safe on the crag, and get out of Colombia. The more space he put between him and Suesca, the easier it would be to pretend this whole sordid thing had never happened.

* * *

The sun was just beginning to shine down when they approached the route, loaded with their gear and a full thirty minutes ahead of the other climbers, who were just starting to poke their heads out of their tents. Bryan was used to hot climates where an early start was an advantage; here, the temperature stayed chilly well into the morning.

Vivian didn't meet his eye as she pulled on climbing shoes and set her gear. Bryan checked the length of lead rope for any frays or weaknesses before he handed it over for Viv to tie it onto her harness with a figure-eight knot, then double-checked her knot. It was a routine, not a doubt about her competence—two sets of eyes were always better than one. More skilled climbers had decked out because of a simple mistake.

"All right, so let me see your rack." He nodded toward the collection of cams, nuts, and slings hanging from her belt, ignoring the flash of amusement that crossed her face at the comment. "You'll need more active pro for this one."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "This coming from Mr. Passive Is Best?"

And here they were, retreading old arguments over whether active or passive protection was best, when in reality it was whatever best suited the rock and the route. Had he not been so irritated at her at the moment, he would have found it

funny. “There’re some cracks that won’t take a hex or a nut, and you’re not going to want to worry about conserving cams. Trust me on this one.”

For once, she didn’t argue and rummaged in her gear, then clipped a few more cams onto her harness. Old-timers who’d started climbing before spring-loaded camming devices existed looked at them as cheating; Bryan figured if it was a choice between a cam or a fall, he’d pick the cam every time.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.” She checked her rope again, chalked her hands from the pouch on her belt, and approached the rock with a look of determination.

“On belay?”

“Belay on,” he replied.

“Climbing.”

“Climb on.” He stayed in position near the wall, feeding rope through the belay device and his hands to give her enough slack to get up to her first anchor point. He’d always loved to watch her on the rock, partly because of her gorgeous body displayed in climbing tights and a skin-tight T-shirt. The thought of that now set a sick feeling in his stomach; she wasn’t his to ogle, no matter what he might have thought the night before.

Mind on her climbing, he reminded himself. Vivian made short work of the first fifteen feet, her technique steady and confident. He began to relax as soon as she took the first cam from her harness, placed it precisely in the crack where he would have, and clipped herself in. Now he had a belay point, so he took up the slack while she looked for her next hold.

She was climbing respectably, placing more pro than strictly necessary, which told him she’d taken his warning seriously. Except she hadn’t yet reached for another cam after the first, choosing to place hexes and nuts where she could fit them. “Set

a cam before the overhang!” he yelled, but either she was too focused on her next move to hear him or she was ignoring him outright. Stubborn woman.

She was at least seventy feet up when she realized she’d gotten herself into an untenable position. He checked the slack on the rope and waited for her to work out a solution. There—thanks to her flexibility, her handhold became a foothold and she could lever herself upward with the power of her legs. She was going to send it on her first try. Unbelievable.

Then Bryan saw the mistake, but it was too late to help her correct: her leg had crossed between the rock and the rope, the anchor below holding it taut against her thigh. Her left hand held steady near her foot, right side pushing upward to the next handhold, and then . . .

Vivian screamed as her supporting leg slipped off the rock.

Bryan automatically prepared himself for a soft catch, but there were bigger problems. The rope flipped her upside down so she was plummeting headfirst down the side of the rock. Every hair on his body lifted in dread. He jumped just as she hit the end of the slack and braced his feet against the wall, a move that should have helped soften the catch and dampen her swing back into the wall.

The nut she’d placed earlier popped out of the rock and zippered the next two out with it.

“No, no, no.” Bryan barely managed to get back on his feet and yanked the rope through the brake as fast as he could, silently praying that one of the anchors would catch before she hit the deck. Then finally, the slack ran out and the rope caught on the cam and held.

Vivian careened into the side of the rock with a sickening crunch, where she hung, her limp body dangling thirty feet off the ground, unmoving. Drops of blood fell in slow motion and spattered the dirt at Bryan’s feet.

“Please,” he mumbled, running the rope through the brake to lower her slowly to the ground. “Please be alive. Please be alive.” She never wore a helmet—Bryan rarely did either—but now he wished with every ounce of him that he’d insisted on it before she’d attempted La Bruja.

Finally, she was on the ground. He unclipped and ran to her side, carefully laying her out flat on the dirt. Blood matted her dark hair and something about her lower body looked wrong, crumpled, but her chest still rose and fell. He put his fingertips to her neck and found her pulse, surprisingly quick considering she was unconscious.

“Help!” he screamed. “*Ayuda!*”

It could have been moments or hours later, but a crowd began to form around them. Alejandro, the guide from the shop near the base camp, pushed his way through and checked her pulse and breathing as Bryan had, then pulled out his cell phone. He dialed the emergency number and then explained the situation to the dispatcher in calm, rapid Spanish. “She’ll be okay,” he said to Bryan, but it was an empty reassurance. No one knew whether she would be okay or not. They hadn’t seen how she’d whipped into the wall, too out of control to break her own fall.

“Just hang in there,” he whispered to her, wanting to do something but knowing that moving her would be the worst thing he could possibly do. He brushed her hair off her face and clasped her hand until he heard the siren from an ambulance approaching. Relief rushed through him. He hadn’t been sure if Suesca had ambulance service; he’d never needed it.

Two paramedics stepped out of the ambulance and carried an unwheeled stretcher to Vivian’s side.

“*¿Que pasó?*” the first man asked, looking automatically to Alejandro.

Bryan quickly explained what had occurred. Had it been any other situation, he would have been amused by the paramedics’

surprise that the gringo spoke their language. The men examined Vivian with little more detail than Bryan and Alejandro had, then the two of them carefully transferred her to the stretcher.

“I’m going with her,” Bryan said. They nodded and he climbed into the back of the ambulance with her.

They were minutes away from the camp when Vivian began to stir and cried out in pain. Her eyes opened slowly, but they didn’t seem to focus.

“Viv, I’m here.” He bent over her and gently squeezed her hand to try to orient her.

“Bryan?”

“Yes, love.”

“Everything hurts.” Tears leaked out of her eyes and slid down her face, breaking his heart more surely than her earlier tears had.

“I know. You had an accident. We’ll be at the hospital soon and they’ll give you something for the pain.”

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. They arrived at the hospital, which was a surprisingly modern-looking white-and-blue two-story building in the small town of Suesca. Bryan said he was her husband so they would give him updates. The doctor in the emergency department examined her, pronounced her hip dislocated, several of her ribs fractured, and her skull cracked, and promptly decided to transfer her to Bogotá.

That trip took over an hour, and Bryan held her hand in the back of yet another ambulance as they traveled to a larger hospital in the capital city. She remained sedated—a mercy when he considered how many broken bones she had.

And the whole time he prayed, *Please don’t let me lose her.*

He was aware of the irony. He’d already lost her three years ago, and once again this morning when she’d announced her engagement to Luke.

They finally arrived at a hospital in Bogotá, a concrete institutional structure that reminded him of a prison. The paramedics took her into the emergency department, where Bryan was immediately pushed out of the room, despite his repeated insistence that he was her husband. Instead, he paced the faded waiting room, pulled out his phone, and dialed the number he'd been dreading calling since the moment she fell.

“Luke, it’s Bryan. Vivian’s hurt. We’re in Colombia.”

* * *

Bryan sat in the bar of his Bogotá hotel, nursing a glass of whiskey and feeling like he'd been run over by a train. This was high rent for his usual means of travel—even if the exchange rate came out to about sixty-seven bucks a night—but he didn't have it in him to dirtbag it as he usually did. Despite his simple needs, he was still the son of a successful Denver real estate developer, and right now he wanted something that felt like home.

Vivian would be okay, or at least as okay as she could get with broken bones and a fractured skull. By now, she would be flying home on the air ambulance plane that Luke had arranged to take her to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles near where they lived together. Where they had been living together, apparently, for the past year—something that Luke had been lying about or at least avoiding the last several times they'd talked. Bryan had relayed the doctor's thoughts on her prognosis in straightforward terms, not softening them or putting hope on them. Bed rest. Physical therapy. She'd walk again. Climbing would be out of the question for quite a while.

Explaining why he and Vivian were in Bogotá together was another story. Bryan tried to pass it off as a friendly climb for old times' sake, but Luke clearly didn't believe it. Maybe it was

something in Bryan's voice or maybe Luke just knew Vivian too well, but he'd gone silent for a long moment while he considered. Then he'd said calmly, "I appreciate you helping me get her home. But after that, I don't think we have anything more to talk about."

He'd apparently meant it literally, because the notice of termination had hit Bryan's inbox less than an hour later, almost as if it had already been drafted and was simply waiting to be sent.

Notice of termination. A fancy way of saying he'd been fired, his sponsorship ended, his means of support gone.

Of course, Luke wouldn't be so obvious as to name the real reason he was firing him; instead, he couched it in words like *exclusivity* and *conflict of interest*, despite the fact he'd been fully aware of the other, minor sponsorships when he signed Bryan. Not that it mattered when the end result was the same. Without Pakka's support, he wasn't a professional climber; he was just a deadbeat, traveling the world with his backpack and his gear rack in order to avoid having a real job. He'd become what his father had always suspected he was.

Bryan let out a sharp laugh and drained the rest of his glass, then gestured for the bartender to pour him another one. What would his father think of this whole situation? Mitchell Shaw was a good Christian man; Bryan's mother, Kathy, was practically a saint. They'd given up lecturing him about his conquests long ago, but sleeping with an almost-married woman and losing his source of income was beyond what even they could overlook. Consequences of his own actions, they'd say. And now he was going to have to deal with them. When you screwed up this badly, there was no such thing as a second chance.

"You look like a man who's had a bad day."

Bryan turned his head toward the American who had sat down beside him. Nondescript in brown dress pants and a white shirt, like a Midwestern businessman. Slightly thinning

hair on top, sympathetic expression. Bryan was half tempted to give a sarcastic retort, but the man seemed sincere enough, so he just gave a single nod.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” The bartender poured Bryan’s drink and he took a slow sip, savoring the burn of the whiskey as it went down. Anyone who said that it was smooth was lying, or maybe he’d just turned wholly into a beer man somewhere along the line. In any case, it blurred the hard edges, and right now that was all he cared about.

The man asked for soda without ice in mangled Spanish, and Bryan quickly translated for him. He looked at Bryan in surprise. “If I had your fluency, my day would be going a lot better.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Central and South America,” he said. “You pick it up.”

“I don’t, apparently. I’ve made several trips to Colombia over the last couple of years, and it doesn’t want to stick. Old dog, new tricks, I guess.”

Bryan smiled vaguely, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a job?”

Bryan turned his head just enough to look the man in the eye, suddenly suspicious. “A job?”

“I was supposed to be headed south today, but my translator bailed on me. You know anything about coffee?”

“I know how I like to drink it.”

“Do you know how to talk about it in Spanish?”

“Enough, I guess. Why?”

The man pulled a business card from his pocket and slid it across the polished bar. “This is my company, Café Libertad. We’re coffee importers, but more than that, we’re . . . I guess you could call us missionaries.”

Bryan slid it back. “Not interested.”

“Are you sure? It’s an interesting story, ours. You see, for the longest time, the only option for farmers was coca, working for the cartels. But it brings violence into communities, wedges the farmers right between the government and the rebels, puts them at the mercy of the ‘war on drugs.’ So we come along and help them shift from growing coca to growing coffee instead. For the first time in decades, thanks to the demand for fair trade organic coffee in the States, the same acreage can produce a greater dollar yield than drugs.”

“Sounds like you’re doing good work,” Bryan said, but he couldn’t force interest where there wasn’t any. He didn’t have it in him today.

“It is. I’m supposed to be visiting several new farms, seeing about bringing them into the co-op. But again, without someone to translate, this was pretty much a wasted trip. You wouldn’t know anything about wasted trips, would you?”

Bryan tossed back the rest of his drink and set the glass firmly on the counter. “I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m the last person you should be asking to join some Christian charity.” He gave the man a wan smile, then eased himself off the stool.

“Are you sure? Because from where I’m sitting, you look like a man in need of a second chance.”

Bryan paused several steps away and turned. “What did you say?”

“I said maybe this is a second chance. I only need you for a week, and I pay well. What have you got to lose?”

What did he have to lose? He had nothing to go back to but the disappointed looks of friends and family. At very least, this delay to the inevitable would pad his bank account. And maybe he’d figure out a new direction by the time he boarded the flight home.

“Okay,” he said finally. “I’m in. When do we start?”

Chapter One

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

In all her years as a publicist, Anlyn Sanchez had never met a mess she couldn't clean up.

Until now.

She gripped her cell phone so hard her fingers began to turn white as she struggled to keep her voice level. "I don't understand how this could have happened. I have a signed contract right in front of me. June nineteenth, Bishop-Kanin wedding."

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Sanchez. I understand how upsetting this is, and I take full responsibility for it. But the situation remains, we are double-booked for the nineteenth. I've already spoken to the other party to see if they'd be willing to change. They're not, and because their contract was signed first, I have no choice but to give them the space."

Ana pressed the fingertips of her free hand into her eyelids. "What are we supposed to do, then? The invitations have already gone out."

"Again, I'm very sorry. Of course we will refund the deposit

and any additional monies paid, and I'll be happy to send you a list of other venues that might have openings—”

Ana stopped listening after the second “very sorry.” One job. She'd had one job and she'd blown it. Melody was handling all of the decor and working with Rachel on the menu; all Ana had had to do was negotiate and book the venue. And now, with the wedding less than three months away, her best friend had nowhere to marry the love of her life.

She almost didn't register the woman's voice still coming from the speaker; she'd ceased to exist the minute she wasn't willing to help. Ana clicked off her phone and, in nearly the same motion, dialed the other member of their little trio, Melody Johansson.

The phone rang several times before Melody picked up. “Hey, Ana. What's up? Is something wrong?”

The low hum of voices and clatter of pans in the background made Ana glance at her clock—5:20. Melody and Rachel would be shutting down the kitchen of Bittersweet Café right now, getting ready to close their doors to retail traffic at six o'clock. “Is Rachel there?”

A couple of sharp bangs, and the noise level dropped sharply. “Not anymore. I stepped outside. But you're starting to freak me out.”

“The venue is double-booked and they gave it to the other party.”

A long silence met the announcement. Then Melody said slowly, “That's . . . unfortunate.”

“It's more than unfortunate, Melody. The wedding is only twelve weeks away and they've got nowhere to get married!” Heads turned in Ana's direction, and she quickly lowered her voice. She wasn't supposed to be handling personal matters in the office, let alone those of a friend, but it wasn't like she had a choice. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to look for another venue, of course. This is Denver, not New York. It’s not like we booked the Plaza three years ahead.”

Melody had been clearly watching rom-coms again; Ana knew for a fact she’d never been to New York, let alone the Plaza Hotel. “Yes, but this is *Denver*. Meaning there’s less than three months of the year we can count on good weather, so everyone gets married between June and August. Things were starting to book up nine months ago.”

“That’s what I don’t understand. We’ve been talking to them the whole time. We have menus chosen. How did no one notice this?”

“I don’t know. Something about a junior sales rep booking the other group and not merging her calendar.”

“How about a different day?”

“We can’t. Alex has family coming in from Moscow. There’s no way we can ask them to reschedule.”

“Well, we’re going to figure this out. Hey, what about Alex’s place? He has that gorgeous roof deck, and it is where their love story began in a way. It could be really meaningful.”

Ana shook her head automatically. “No can do. They’ve invited a hundred and fifty people, and even if we could manage to stuff that many guests up there, I think the fire marshal and the building department would have something to say about it. I’m sure it’s not rated for that weight or those numbers.”

Several feet away, Ana’s boss, Lionel, poked his head out and gestured to her from his framed glass doorway. “Ana, when you’re done, can I see you in my office?”

Ana nodded and held up one finger. “Sorry, Mel, I’ve gotta go. Let’s talk later? And don’t say a word to Rachel until we have some solution to present. I don’t want her worrying about this.”

“Okay, I’ll—”

Ana’s finger was already on the End Call button before the words came from the speaker, and by then it was too late. She had hung up on her friend midsentence. She cringed, but there was no time to call back and apologize. Besides, Melody wouldn’t be offended—she knew how crazy Ana’s job was.

She inhaled deeply, counting to herself as she sucked oxygen into her lungs, then exhaled for twice as long. A meditation exercise meant to calm her nerves and slow her heart rate. It didn’t help.

She rose from her desk, smoothed down her pencil skirt, and strode across the room to her boss’s office. “You needed to see me, Lionel?”

“Yes, I did, Ana. Please close the door.”

She turned around and pulled the glass door shut behind her, only then noticing that they were not alone. Morgan sat in the armchair in the corner, clutching a handful of Kleenex. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to need to you take over Christopher Mason from Morgan.”

Ana blinked at her boss for a long moment, then looked at Morgan. “Why? You fought tooth and nail for that account.”

Lionel cleared his throat. “It seems that Mason has been harassing Morgan and she is uncomfortable with continuing.”

Ana narrowed her eyes at the first whiff of dishonesty. Morgan never had a problem with clients. As women dealing with badly behaved men, they were always fending off unwanted advances and unwarranted assumptions. Morgan was the first person to set them straight, often in painful ways if they tried anything funny. The tissue-clutching, teary-eyed victim sitting in the chair across from Ana had to be a complete fabrication.

“This is a great opportunity for you, Ana.”

“I’ve already got a full roster of wealthy, wannabe frat boys. Why would I want to add another one?”

“Because this one’s father is about to be appointed to a cabinet position, and said father happens to be a longtime friend of my family. So I would take it as a personal favor if you would get him in line and keep him out of trouble for the next month until the nomination is announced.”

Ana took a deep breath and considered. It sounded like Lionel was giving her a choice, but she knew from experience that once you started turning down clients at Massey-Coleman, it was a short slide to finding yourself on the way out the door. They were hired to be can-do types, and that meant accepting even the most annoying and difficult clients. There was a reason why publicists in the crisis management division got paid so much—they earned each and every penny.

“Fine,” Ana said with a sharp nod. “Morgan, I need all your files on him. I’ll give him a call and figure out where we are. Lionel, are you notifying him of the change, or am I?”

“Somehow I think he would take the change better coming from you.” The glint in Lionel’s eye was her first indication she might have made a mistake by acquiescing so easily. “Morgan, that will be all. Please get Ana all your files before you leave today.”

They both nodded curtly at their boss, and Ana preceded Morgan from the office. As soon as they were halfway across the room to her desk, Ana rounded on her. “What was that all about? And don’t tell me for one minute you’ve suddenly lost your ability to shut a client down before he can even attempt a pass at you.”

Morgan straightened, no sign of the tearful demeanor in sight. “He’s called me in the middle of the night every night this week. My husband has threatened to either kill him or divorce me if I don’t dump him.”

“So you thought you’d make him my problem?”

Morgan grimaced. “Sorry about that. I was actually lobbying for him to go to Ryan. I figured he wouldn’t be as demanding with a male publicist.”

“But somehow Lionel got the idea that I was the perfect person to handle him.”

“Well, they don’t call you the Atomic Nun for nothing.”

“No one calls me that except you.” But the joking nickname loosened the knot in Ana’s stomach and she managed a smile. “Fine. But you owe me big time.”

“I promise. Anything you need . . . that doesn’t involve Christopher Mason.” Morgan sat down at her computer, clicked a few keys, and attached a file folder to an email message with Ana’s address on it. “On its way.”

Ana gave her a nod and strode back to her desk, concentrating on her breathing again. Morgan’s email was waiting at the top of her inbox, so she wasted no time in downloading the file and beginning her perusal. From the notes, it was hard to tell that Christopher Mason was a difficult client—it was just the usual guidance for anyone related to a politician. Keep them out of the press, keep their personal activities—whatever they might be—quiet, unless it was a specifically orchestrated photo op. The media was rabid when it came to the families of politicians running on a morality ticket. The minute someone came out in favor of family values or the like, reporters combed through the dirty laundry hoping to find an illegitimate baby or a gay son they could parade around as a sign of the politician’s hypocrisy. But from her reading, she didn’t see much more than the propensity to drink and speak a little too freely at fund-raisers for his father’s campaign. Maybe Morgan was telling the truth and she was just doing this because her husband didn’t like her getting late-night calls.

Only one way to find out. Ana found his number, picked up her phone, and dialed. Mason answered on the first ring.

“Mr. Mason, my name is Analyñ Sanchez. I’m Morgan Caroll’s colleague at the Massey-Coleman Group.”

His response was cordial, professional even. “Hi, Analyñ. It’s nice to meet you. What can I do for you this afternoon?”

“We’ve had a bit of internal restructuring here, and I’ll be working on your account now. I was hoping we could get together, just to meet, get to know each other a bit.”

“How about tonight?”

Ana paused and glanced at her watch. She had dinner plans with Rachel and Melody. “I’m afraid I’m not available tonight.”

“That’s too bad. I’ve got reservations at Equity Bar and Grill and my dinner date had to cancel on me. Tell me if I’m mistaken, but I seem to remember Lionel Massey assuring my father that my publicist would be at my disposal whenever necessary.”

Ana let out her breath carefully. If Lionel had really conveyed that message, it went a long way to explaining why Morgan had demanded that he be assigned to someone else. Some clients seemed to think they needed to get their money’s worth.

And if Mason ran back to Daddy, who then called Lionel, Ana would have plenty of free time to spend on dinner with her friends.

“Very well. I can reschedule. What time is your reservation?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.” Ana forced a smile so the feigned warmth would transfer to her voice and then hung up. She quickly sent a group text to her friends.

Sorry to bail, but I can’t make dinner tonight. Last minute meeting with new (problem) client.

Moments later, Rachel replied, Come by my house when you’re done. Melody brought home eclairs from the bakery. We’ll save you some.

Melody's response instantly followed: *Speak for yourself. Ana, if you're not there by nine, I'm eating them ALL.*

Ana texted back: *Fair enough.* For the last eight years, she, Melody, and Rachel had been practically inseparable. Her two friends worked in the food service industry, Rachel as a chef and Melody as a baker, but they had opened their own place together less than a year ago. Somehow, even owning a business that required them to report to work at 4 a.m., they seemed to have more free time than she did. In fact, it had been three weeks since she'd seen either of them in more than a drive-by at Bittersweet Café.

But that was the job. Long hours, late nights, and problem clients. When she'd taken the position in the crisis publicity division, she'd thought she was making the smart move; after all, most of her regular clients were in the middle of mini crises on a regular basis. Turned out it was less a matter of crises and more a matter of highly sensitive situations—she spent more time mitigating the negatives than accentuating the positives. It wasn't that she lied. Everything she publicized on her clients' behalf was 100 percent true. It was just that every fact was interpreted through the listener's bias; it was her job to make sure the bias leaned in her clients' favor. Like every criminal deserved a competent lawyer, she firmly believed that every public figure could use a brilliant publicist.

And just like every defense lawyer, she wished for once that she'd get a client who was innocent.

"That's why they pay you the big bucks, Ana," she murmured to herself. As if to punctuate that statement, she rose onto the five-inch heels of her favorite Louboutins, hoisted her Prada handbag over her shoulder, and prepared to make her way down to the parking garage where her leased company car—a shiny Mercedes-Benz SUV—waited for her. All the

symbols of her success. All items that, once upon a time, she'd thought she needed in order to prove herself.

And not for the first time, she wondered if it was a hollow victory.

* * *

Ana didn't have time to go home and change before her dinner meeting at the high-end steak house, so at the last minute, she made a stop in the ladies' room to freshen up her makeup from the case she kept in her tote. A few bobby pins secured her thick black hair into a sophisticated French twist. Fortunately, the office dress code was business—the unspoken understanding among the women that it also meant both sophisticated and stylish—so her black peplum suit and bow-necked silk blouse would fit right into the ritzy surroundings.

She made it the handful of blocks from her office building in just a few minutes and handed her vehicle over to the valet at eight on the dot. Then she marched inside to the hostess desk. “Christopher Mason's party?”

“Right this way.” The hostess smiled at Ana and led her through the sprawling dining room to where a man sat at a table with two women.

Two very young women.

“Mr. Mason?” Ana asked, inwardly hoping he would answer in the negative, even though she'd already seen his photo and knew he was the one she was meeting.

“You must be Analyn.” He rose with a blinding smile and shook her hand, then gestured to the empty chair on his right. “I would like you to meet my friends Catelyn and Rebecca.”

Ana looked over the “friends” surreptitiously. They were barely twenty, slathered in cosmetics, and squeezed into cheap polyester cocktail dresses that showed off both leg and cleavage. Everything about them screamed *escort*.

A waitress came to their table then to take their drink orders.

“Double Manhattan on the rocks,” Mason said immediately, flashing that smile for the waitress again.

“Sparkling water for me,” Ana said. When the waitress looked at the girls, she said, “Them too.”

Only a quick second glance in the girls’ direction betrayed the waitress’s curiosity, but she smiled and nodded and hustled off to get their drinks. When Ana glanced at Mason, he was studying her beneath lowered lids, a half smile on his lips. So that’s what this was about. A test. Or better yet, a statement. No wonder Morgan had resorted to deception to get rid of him, and why they’d been hired by the senator from Colorado to babysit his son. She was trying to decide on a response when a cell phone rang.

Mason fished his phone from his jacket’s breast pocket and glanced at the screen. “Excuse me a moment.” He answered the phone and strode toward the front entrance, his voice carrying through the din of conversations.

Ana fixed a stern glare on the girls. “How old are you two?”

Rebecca lifted her chin. “I’m a sophomore at CU.”

“Studying what?”

“I’m still undeclared.”

Ana rapid-fired at Catelyn, “And you? What’s your major?”

Catelyn averted her eyes. “I don’t have one yet.”

Fabulous. She probably wasn’t out of high school. Ana felt a sudden rush of pity for them. Not even twenty, but working in such an unsavory business. “You two need to go. Now. Before he returns.”

“But we didn’t get paid—” Catelyn began before Rebecca hastily shushed her.

“Come on, our night’s over.” Rebecca picked up her handbag and grabbed Catelyn’s arm.

“Don’t stop, even if he talks to you,” Ana warned, “or my next call is going to be to your parents.”

The older girl didn’t look fazed, but the terrified look on the younger one’s face as Rebecca hustled her out of the restaurant told Ana all she needed to know. Good. Did Catelyn have any idea what she’d almost gotten herself into? How this could have turned out if it wasn’t all a stunt to get a rise out of his new publicist?

“Where are they going?” Mason demanded as he approached the table. His voice caused the patrons at surrounding tables to turn in his direction.

“Home.” Ana gestured placidly to the seat opposite her. “Sit down, Mr. Mason.”

He scowled at her, but he sat.

“Let me make one thing clear. While I’m your publicist, there will be no more escorts or Tinder dates or anything that even smacks of sexual misconduct. We just need to get you through the next month without doing anything to disgrace your family name. Once you’re no longer my responsibility, you can do whatever you want.”

“Wait a second. You work for me—”

“No, Mr. Mason. I work for your father. A man who will be very displeased to find you spending time with underage escorts who should be home studying for their chemistry finals.”

Mason looked like he was about to argue, but she stilled him with a look. “Now that all the children are out of the room, I’m going to buy you an excellent meal and we’re going to discuss the ground rules for our business relationship. Which, by the way, does not include after-hours calls unless you’re in jail, about to be put in jail, or imminently facing a TV crew.”

He cracked a smile. “Morgan told you about that.”

“Morgan is too polite to tell you that you’re being an arrogant, juvenile tool.”

“But you’re not too polite?”

Ana knew her smile looked cold, if not downright predatory. It was a practiced expression she could drag out on cue. “I’ve been accused of many things, Mr. Mason, but that’s not one of them.” She glanced up and put on a much more welcoming smile. “Here comes our server with our drinks. If you don’t mind the suggestion, they serve a delicious rib eye.”

For the next two hours, Ana outlined her expectations for his behavior and went through the opportunities that she’d lined up for him earlier this evening—one, volunteering at the grand opening of a new free clothing store for the homeless in Five Points; and two, mentoring minority business owners through a new SBA program.

“You’ve got an undergrad degree from Harvard and an MBA from the London School of Economics. There’s no reason for you to be currently unemployed. Play it my way, repair your reputation, and I’ll have you in a six-figure consulting position by the end of the month.”

Mason studied her, a glimmer of respect surfacing for the first time. “Okay. If you think you can do that, I’m on board.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch with the details on Monday. I fully expect this to be a pleasant and productive month.”

They finished their meal and Ana paid, escaping out to the valet stand. Her car had just been brought around when a message from Lionel buzzed through her phone. How did dinner with the frat boy go?

Ana cracked a smile. Good. I put him on a short leash and appealed to his greed. He’s going to be too busy to be trouble.

I knew you could do it. This is why I assigned you to this account and not Ryan.

Thank you for the confidence. I’ll keep you posted.

Ana put her car in gear, preparing to pull into traffic. Then she stopped. She was supposed to head to Rachel's, where she'd normally spill all the ridiculous details about her latest ridiculous client. But suddenly she didn't have the heart for it. This whole situation made her feel dirty, as if managing the creep had somehow rubbed off on her. There was nothing funny about it.

She texted Rachel and Melody: Sorry, guys, I'm not going to make it. Rain check? I'm still coming to supper club tomorrow, no matter what.

Rachel: We understand.

Melody: Whew. That's good. I already ate your eclairs.

Ana smiled to herself and pulled into traffic for real this time, but the momentary surge of happiness didn't last. She'd been awake for eighteen hours already. Her eyes were practically crossed with exhaustion, and the balls of her feet ached from a full day in shoes that had been designed for looks and status, not comfort. By the time she pulled into the parking structure beneath her Lower Downtown condo building, she ached for nothing more than her soft bed. A shower could wait until morning. Heck, pajamas could wait until morning.

She rode the elevator up to the twelfth floor, made a beeline to her front door, and punched her code into the smart lock. It unlatched with a click and she pushed her way through with a sigh of relief.

Her oasis. Small by most standards, but spacious by LoDo's, it was twelve hundred square feet of elegant design and calming colors. Herringbone hardwood floors. Upholstery in velvet and satin. Muted antique oriental rugs. It might seem like it was orchestrated for show, but she rarely had guests, even her best friends. This was all for her own pleasure. It was just a shame she had so little time to enjoy it.

A flashing red light drew her attention to the marble-accented kitchen, and she dropped her bag beside the phone before dialing voice mail. She knew before the message began who it would

be—she only kept a home line because her mother refused to call her cell phone while she was at work. And she was always at work.

Flora Sanchez's familiar Manila-accented voice poured through the speaker in her usual combination of Filipino and English. "Ana, this is Mom. Can you call back? *Gusto ko malaman kung uuwi ka para sa birthday ng Daddy mo sa May. Da-dating din ang mga kapatid mo, gusto ka nilaang makita.*" *I want to know if you're coming home for your dad's birthday in May. Your sisters and brother will be here. They all want to see you.*

Ana deleted the message and dug in her bag for her planner. Under Monday's date, she jotted *Put in vacation request*. She had plenty of time to plan, since her dad's birthday was after Mason would no longer be her problem. She should be able to steal two days to fly home to Southern California for a birthday party. As soon as she confirmed her time off, she'd call her mom back and book her flight.

Then her eyes alighted on the grid at the bottom of her page—her daily habits. Everything from Scripture reading to making her bed to flossing her teeth. The only box left unchecked for today was *exercise*. Thanks to Mason, she'd missed the hot yoga class she'd scheduled before dinner.

It's late. Go to bed and do it tomorrow.

But that empty box glared at her, and she knew the blank space in an otherwise-filled week would eat at her. She hadn't achieved her toned, size-zero figure by skipping workouts just because she was tired.

She dragged herself to her bedroom with a deep sigh, traded her suit for a pair of shorts and a sports bra, and climbed onto the treadmill positioned in front of the wide-screen TV. She inserted the flat plastic key and pressed Start.

"Five miles, Ana. You can do this. It's only five miles."

And one more box checked to keep up her six-month streak. Just one more box for a perfect day.